Working-Class Labor in Postapocalyptic America

Affect, Politics, and the "Forgotten Man" in *Death Stranding*

Stefan Schubert

Abstract

This article examines Hideo Kojima's 2019 *Death Stranding* as a postapocalyptic video game intent on evoking a particular kind of "Americanness." I analyze the game for its textual and cultural politics, arguing that it reconstructs a vision of the United States that is not just built on older myths like that of westward expansion and rugged individualism but that also evokes a more contemporary trope of the "forgotten man." In my reading, *Death Stranding* champions not just any person as the potential savior of America but it specifically marks its protagonist as a white working-class male, suggesting that this is the kind of person—and the kind of labor that he allegedly performs best—needed to bring the US back together. I trace this argument by examining how the game's visuals, narrative, and gameplay intersect in depicting a postapocalyptic America that evokes the western genre, in affectively guiding its players to feel for the game's protagonist as a "forgotten man," and in how the gameplay's embrace of working-class labor leads to a ludo-affective dissonance that complicates *Death Stranding*'s political project.

Suggested Citation: Schubert, Stefan. "Working-Class Labor in Postapocalyptic America: Affect, Politics, and the 'Forgotten Man' in *Death Stranding*." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2023): 291–309, DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v4i2.160.

Keywords: video game; postapocalypse; affect; class; whiteness; masculinity; forgotten man; politics; Trump, Donald J.

Peer Review: This article was reviewed by the issue's editors and two external reviewers.

Working-Class Labor in Postapocalyptic America

Affect, Politics, and the "Forgotten Man" in *Death Stranding*

Stefan Schubert

Hideo Kojima's 2019 video game *Death Stranding* presents a particularly striking vision of the postapocalyptic United States: a cataclysmic event (the eponymous "death stranding") has made the landscape uninhabitable and has led to the remaining US population living in isolated underground hubs. They rely on "porters" like the game's protagonist Sam to deliver important items and equipment from one location to the next. These porters, many of whom work for the United Cities of America (UCA), build both literal and metaphorical "bridges" in order to reconnect parts of the United States with each other. Released in November 2019,[1] the game's fictional premise eerily reminded later commentators of the global changes brought on by the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020,[2] with many people sitting at home, isolated and socially distanced, and increasingly dependent on parcel deliveries and new services like no-contact delivery. In this way, the game's postapocalyptic imaginary world soon hit close to home and offered its audience a digital, playable version of a clearly postapocalyptic America that, at the same time, drew parallels to the contemporary (political) landscape not just in terms of its themes but also partly through its speculative setting.

Against this backdrop, in this article, I focus on an ideological reading of *Death Stranding* that analyzes the game's cultural politics and how it taps into mythologized discourses about the US. My analysis of *Death Stranding* goes beyond the predominant themes of the game's reception, which seemed evenly split between celebrating it as another genius invention by the gaming "auteur" Hideo Kojima or deriding it for its slow, convoluted story and its mundane gameplay, jokingly labeling it "the most advanced walking simulator the world has ever seen."[3] Instead focusing on the game's cultural politics, my argument is that in imagining a particular kind of future,

Death Stranding not only evokes well-known American myths such as the frontier and the rugged individualist but also a more recent one—the trope of the "forgotten man": that is, stories that focus on white working-class men as protagonists and stylize them as victims. In my reading, *Death Stranding* champions not just any person as the potential savior of America, but it specifically marks its protagonist as a white working-class male, suggesting that this is the kind of person—and the kind of labor that he allegedly performs best—needed to bring the US back together.

I will pursue this argument about the cultural work that *Death Stranding* does by analyzing how its narrative, visual, and ludic elements intersect. I begin by introducing the game's world as a postapocalyptic America, highlighting how it rests on specifically US-American myths to represent this world, specifically tied to the western. Then, I connect this more general perspective on the game's visuals and its setting to its narrative ambitions, demonstrating how its story both narratively and affectively taps into the trope of the "forgotten man." Finally, by taking the gameplay into consideration more closely, I identify a ludo-affective disconnect in the game's political ambitions, which principally revolves around the representation of the working class and the neoliberal embrace of the role of labor in (postapocalyptic) US society.

Postapocalyptic America

Death Stranding is difficult to pinpoint as a game—that is, what (game) genre(s) it adheres to has been a matter of debate. Even before the game's release, Kojima promoted the idea that it might lead to an entirely new genre of "strand" games.[4] Most generally, *Death Stranding* could be seen as an action game that provides players with a third-person perspective on their protagonist Sam, controlling him through the environment. Careful navigation through the terrain is the main principle of engaging with the world, since Sam is tasked with bringing different kinds of (sometimes fragile) cargo from one location to another; he often travels on foot—with loads of equipment attached to his body—but later also on a motorcycle and in a truck, and he interacts with the environment by constructing bridges or using ladders and ropes. Although there are also combat and stealth elements, the gameplay centrally revolves around the transportation of goods while traversing hazardous environments and difficult-to-reach areas. For instance, when climbing through a mountainous region, maintaining Sam's physical balance so that he does not drop and damage any of the cargo is often the main challenge. These tasks complement the game's central storyline of Sam having to reconnect parts of America with each other by bringing certain hubs back into the network as he delivers cargo to them, a job he performs at the behest of the government-like entity of the UCA and its main leaders.[5]

Overall, the game's visuals, setting, and general narrative premise evoke a postapocalyptic world that is at the same time distinctly US-American. This goes beyond the actual physical setting of *Death Stranding* in the continental US and includes numerous subtler and more mythical references to the United States' national imagination. Specifically, in how the game portrays a postapocalyptic world and narrative, it essentially follows the pattern of the ur-American genre of the western. In this sense, while its game genre is harder to define and its "narrative" genre is certainly also a generic hybrid (among others, it is also very clearly postapocalyptic science fiction), I would argue that aspects of the western are at the core of its narrative and semantic interests. As part of a recent trend towards postapocalyptic video games, *Death Stranding* can thus be seen to follow the framework of the "post-apocalyptic cowboy" who "mistrust[s] or learn[s] to mistrust large communities."[6] Next to some basic plot and character elements (for instance, imagining Sam as a cowboy, having traded a horse for a motorcycle), this extends to the mythology of the western as well, since *Death Stranding* champions some of the ideas inherent in the myth of the frontier, the rugged individualist, westward expansion, and, thus, American exceptionalism.[7]

These myths are evident in the game's basic narrative drive: the overall task of "resurrecting" America and (re)creating a union by connecting individual underground hubs and cities with each other is imagined similarly to the narrative of westward expansion characteristic of the western genre, as the game's overview of showing the "Chiral Network Coverage" suggests (Illustration 1). As the map shows, Sam starts out in Washington, D.C., which in the game is referred to as "Capital Knot City," and from there he has to go west. As players progress through the game, more and more dots on the map are connected to each other, until they arrive on the West Coast, dubbed the "Western Region" in the game. The map, with the stars of the UCA logo superimposed on it, thus tracks Sam's progress and encourages players to continuously move west in what is essentially a civilizing quest: the areas to the west are imagined as the unconnected "wilderness," and bringing them into the UCA network is akin to bringing "civilization" to areas imagined as barren, underdeveloped, and generally empty space. Although some of the more remote "preppers" are initially hesitant to joining the network, the actual process of connecting them to the UCA is generally framed positively—Viktor Frank of Port Knot City, for instance, wants Sam to "usher [them] into a new chiral age" and tells him that they have been "waiting forever and a day for this."[8] Hence, just like the liminal figure of the cowboy protagonist in the prototypical western, it is only Sam who knows how to properly navigate between wilderness and civilization, continuously moving the line of the "frontier" westward while not immersing himself too much in the "civilized" communities, as he has to leave these cities again to continue west.

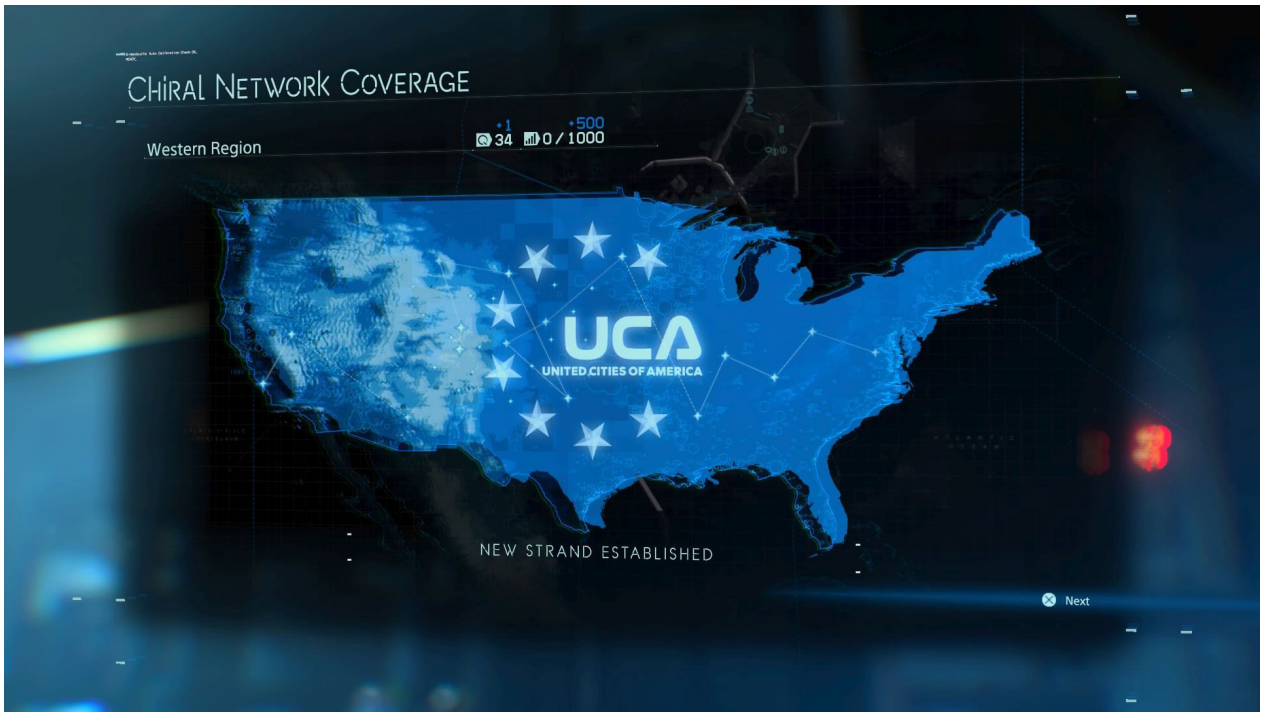

Illustration 1: Map showing the "Chiral Network Coverage."
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

The mythical iconography of the western—and the implicit binary oppositions that come with it—is also evoked in the visual representation of the game's landscape. Next to narrative cutscenes that force players into specific story sequences, players are free to navigate the game's open world and position the camera accordingly, being able to look around the environment. However, at numerous points, the game imbues the open-world exploration with more meaning because after certain story triggers or when arriving at a location for the first time, a particular song (usually with vocals) is being played. In such instances, the song and artist are displayed on the screen, for instance the track "Asylums For The Feeling feat. Leila Adu" by Silent Poets when players approach Port Knot City for the first time (Illustration 2). This feature increases the affective significance of that particular sequence, suggesting to players that they have achieved something important or that they should take a moment to reflect on their surroundings. In Illustration 2, for instance, the natural, rocky landscape in the foreground that the player is traversing is set up in contrast to the industrial cityscape seen in the distance. From this particular space, Sam then has to navigate his way down the sloped and rocky surface until he arrives at the outskirts of the underground hub. The visual division between rural wilderness and urban "civilization," with Sam negotiating between the two spaces, presents a significant parallel to the western as well, enhanced in its narrative significance by the careful use of vocalized, emotional music.

Although a call to community is key to the game's main plot, *Death Stranding* also

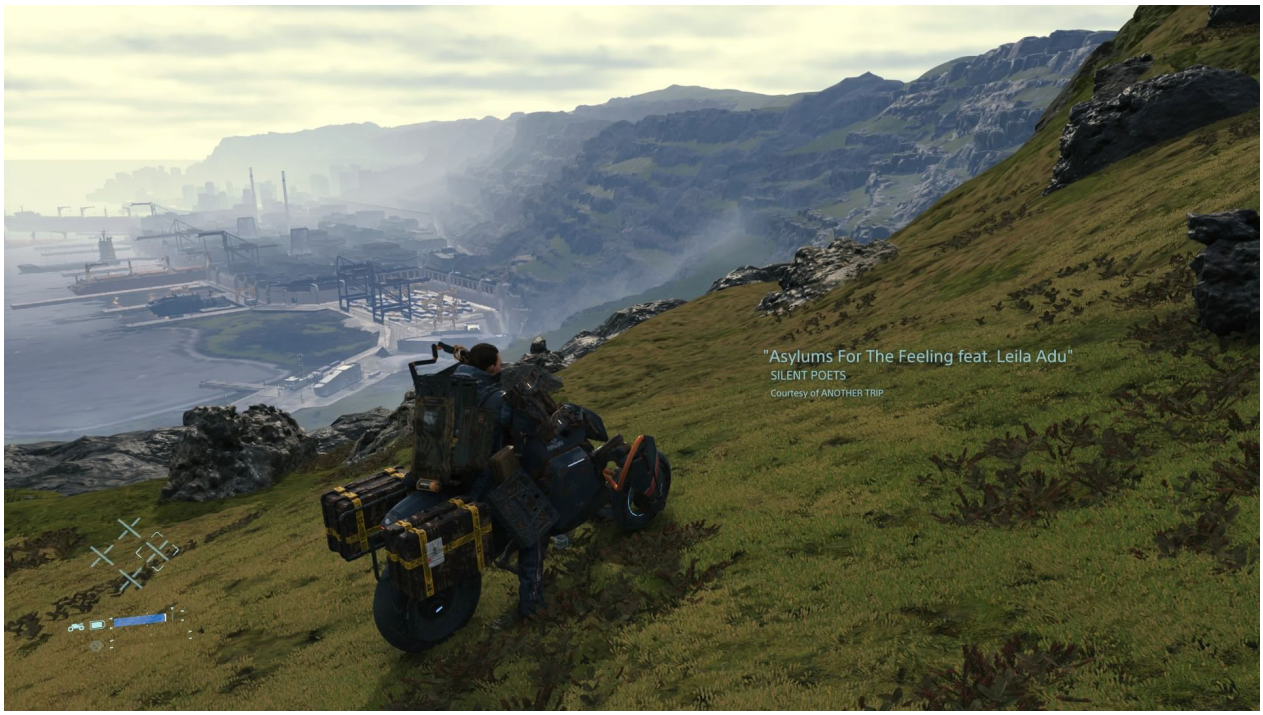

Illustration 2: Sam on a motorcycle looking over Port Knot City.
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

subscribes to the importance of a "rugged individualist" facilitating this kind of unity. Similar to the protagonist in westerns,[9] Sam is portrayed as a loner, unable to join any of these communities or form bonds with people. Sam even suffers from "aphenphosmphobia," the fear of being touched, to emphasize his isolated, misanthropic attitude. While he encounters a number of other characters throughout his journey, the main tasks are all performed alone by the player as Sam, whose name's evocation of "Uncle Sam" further cements how interested the game is in telling a story specifically about the United States. In this way, the game's plot follows a stereotypical hero myth of one particular individual being able to save the world, and Sam's "legendary" status among the UCA is frequently mentioned by the people he meets and connects to the network. The game seems aware of this stereotype, for instance when the character Heartman tells Sam, "As cliché as it sounds, you're our only hope."[10] Yet the mere self-reflexive awareness of these tropes does not diminish their narrative impact,[11] as this is exactly how the game imagines a solution to the desperation brought about by the apocalyptic event of the death stranding: what is needed are the heroic efforts of one single person (specifically a white working-class man).

In addition to this adherence to the western formula and ideology in the game's narrative premise, *Death Stranding* also includes more overt references to the actual United States and the time of the game's release. For instance, the game features an extensive database that collects texts about the world and the people who inhabit it, among them interviews with and emails from some of the preppers Sam meets

on his journey. One of these, called "The Elder," makes explicit references to what he calls the "America of the Past," saying that, as an immigrant, he "even bought into the American Dream for a minute" because "they let a black guy and a woman take a shot at the presidency." After, however, he recalls that "people became so damned … intolerant" and that "we even elected a guy right before the Death Stranding that wanted to build a wall along the whole border."[12] Clearly evoking Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump in all but name, the game here is quite explicit in explaining how its fantastic postapocalyptic scenario engages with the backdrop of the United States of the late 2010s, even chronologically tying its cataclysmic event directly to the Trump presidency. While the character of The Elder is first presented as disillusioned with the promise of America because of the kind of national character that became visible through Trump's election, Sam's actions can eventually convince him to join the UCA, but only with him insisting that "you damn well better make sure that you do right by each and every American … That's the social contract."[13] This minor character stands symbolically for the overall idea behind the game's quest to have Sam reunite and thus rebuild the US: there is disillusionment with the current (or past) political landscape and its divisiveness, but there is also still hope that things can get better if everybody trusts, helps, and relies on each other again. By tying this idea directly to the Trump presidency, *Death Stranding* expresses political ambitions, centered around the importance of unity and human connection. This notion of community, however, stands at odds with the game's western-inspired individualism, and it is curiously motivated by a politically reactionary appeal to embrace the figure of the white working-class man in particular.

The Trope of the "Forgotten Man"

Death Stranding's depiction of the possibility to reunite and rebuild the United States after the apocalypse—and how the game wants its players to emotionally invest in this idea—does not just follow the established myths tied to the western but also taps into what could be called the trope of the "forgotten man." This term refers to (both political and pop-cultural) representations of white working-class men as allegedly "forgotten" and neglected in public discourse, a misconceived idea that has become increasingly popular in mainstream film during the 2010s, slightly preceding Trump's presidential campaign. In fact, the phrase "forgotten man" has a longer history in the US, first used prominently by William Graham Sumner in a series of essays in 1883 and then later picked up by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in quite a different meaning, and by other presidents as well.[14] In these contexts, the "forgotten man" is mostly used as a political and arguably populist tool, to point to an allegedly neglected part of society, sometimes the working class, sometimes the middle class. More recently, however, in his 2017 inauguration address, Donald Trump referred to

"closed . . . factories" and "struggling families all across our land," claiming that "the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer."[15] While the vagueness of who exactly Trump was referring to was part of the appeal, the images used to describe this portion of society were distinctly working-class. A particularly explicit evocation of this image, the 2011 painting *The Forgotten Man* by the conservative political artist Jon McNaughton, depicts past US presidents (especially but not only Democrats, and particularly Barack Obama) showing no interest in a man relegated to the painting's bottom left.[16] The person is clearly marked as a man, a white man, and through his shirt, his boots, and his jeans, also as working-class. Politicians are not paying any attention to that particular part of society, the painting seems to suggest—in turn, Trump framed his electoral upset also as a kind of redemption for this segment of the US population.

While such a trope had been present in US popular culture long before Trump was elected, there has been a surge of similar stories around his election, also in films and other media texts that might not follow an avowedly conservative project but that nevertheless tap into this backlash discourse. This includes, for instance, the films *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), *Hell or High Water* (2016), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Leave No Trace* (2019) as well as, to different degrees, the 2019 *Ad Astra* and *Joker* as well as the television shows *Ozark* (Netflix, 2017–2022) and *Fargo* (FX, 2014–). On some level, they all feature what Jack Halberstam calls "white men behaving sadly": they depict "a world where the white working class man has no power," for instance having "a really bad job," suffering from the "burden of parenthood," or facing "verbal abuse from women and people of color." And yet these characters take center stage in these worlds; as Halberstam phrases it: "All the bad things that happen around him, are *his* bad things," disregarding the fact that the "tragedy from which the white man suffers is of his own making."[17] In these media texts, the audience is supposed to feel for and with these characters—that is, they are narratively and cinematographically designed in a way to afford feelings of pity and empathy for their protagonists because they seem neglected, disregarded, and without power or agency—despite their privileged status as white men.[18]

Such stories can be seen as part of a larger discourse of white masculinity "in crisis." As Sally Robinson argues, in a number of recent fictional texts, "we . . . see white men taking up the position of rebel or resistance fighter, fighting the power and the status quo. The irony, of course, is that the status quo is embodied, these somewhat paranoid narratives suggest, in the minority." A "collective white male identity" is then forged "around claims of victimization," "a fantasy that . . . requires the erasure of systemic and institutionalized white and male privilege."[19] Intersectionally speaking, the designation "working-class" then risks becoming "the identity of last resort for those, mainly white men, left out of other identity categories."[20] It is within this

ideological paradox that stories about the American "forgotten men" depict them being constrained by their wives, feeling lost and not "valued" by society anymore, suggesting to their audience that these protagonists should be pitied for things happening to them, disregarding their agency. Such narrative patterns also work across media and can be traced in *Death Stranding* as well, which is thus an example of adapting the forgotten-man trope not only to the genres of science fiction or dystopia but also to the medium of video games.[21]

The game's protagonist, Sam, is closely modeled after actor Norman Reedus, a fact that was pointed out repeatedly in trailers for the game and that is metatextually referenced in the game's world as well.[22] This extratextual element characterizes him as male and white, something that the diegetic world also strengthens, for instance through the inclusion of nonwhite characters like Die-Hardman, who, in turn, mark Sam's whiteness. While the postapocalyptic world of *Death Stranding* is in many ways structured radically differently from the contemporary US, there are still elements in the game that mark Sam as working-class. This includes the casting of Norman Reedus, who is best known for portraying the character of Daryl Dixon in the television show *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022),[23] initially introduced as a "redneck" and expert in hunting and tracking, along with other lower-class stereotypes. In addition to this intertextual nod, it is especially Sam's primary job that links him to the realities of America's working class, with the focus on hard manual labor as a delivery person (something that I will return to in the final section). Plus, there are smaller elements, like his fondness of motorcycles, his anti-authoritarian attitude, and stand-your-ground stance, that function as expressions of "working-class culture,"[24] which together construct an intersecting identity of a white male heterosexual working-class protagonist.

Portraying Sam in an affectively similar way to forgotten-man stories mainly works through his backstory, which is gradually unraveled in the game. Throughout most of *Death Stranding*, Sam is characterized as a disillusioned individual, seemingly pessimistic about the future of the United States, and generally sad and sulky in his everyday encounters. While he accomplishes the things that are asked of him, he does so in a notably dispassionate and indifferent manner. As players find out in the course of the game, one of the reasons for that is a traumatic past: Sam has a special connection to the world of the dead, and he is able to resurrect (or "repatriate," in the game's lingo) after dying. The revelation of the consequences of this condition eventually led his wife, Lucy, to commit suicide while pregnant with their unborn child. Her death, in turn, caused what the game refers to as a "voidout," a massive explosion that killed everybody in her vicinity, with only Sam—as a repatriate—surviving. Not only is Sam grieving this loss, he also blames himself for it. Apparently unable to cope with the guilt he feels, his isolation and detachment from the world seem to work as

a kind of martyrdom for him, not wanting to associate himself with anybody again for fear of what happened to Lucy. Overall, this is a remarkably similar plot setup and affective revelation to a film like *Manchester by the Sea*, whose "sad" protagonist also blames himself for having caused the death of his children and who, as a consequence, goes throughout life in a detached and isolated manner, not wanting to associate himself with other people because he feels he does not "deserve" the joy that could come from that.

This kind of vulnerable masculinity is further established through the game's interest in fatherhood. On the one hand, players gradually witness how Sam forms a bond with his "BB," an unborn baby that he carries with him in a special pod in order to connect to the world of the dead. He later names the baby Lou, in reference to his own unborn child, who was supposed to be called Louise. This embrace of fatherhood is paralleled in his own experience of growing up without a father. Another character in the game, Cliff, who is technically dead but continues to roam in the world of the living, is shown continually searching for his BB. Via flashbacks, players see that he had lost his wife and later his unborn son, as well. Throughout the game's plot, Cliff follows and haunts Sam presumably because the latter is carrying Cliff's son, the BB Sam has named Lou—players learn about this through flashbacks as well, which Sam seems to have access to thanks to his connection to Lou. However, at the end of the game, it is revealed that Cliff's unborn son turned out to be Sam, which is why Sam is experiencing these memories.[25] In a fantastic flashback sequence, Sam and Cliff get to interact, and Cliff tells Sam that "being a father . . . didn't make [him] scared. It made [him] brave," referring to Sam as "[his] son" and "[his] bridge to the future."[26] This particular cutscene shows Sam looking at a dying Cliff, sitting on the floor and holding baby Sam in his arms (Illustration 3), with father and (the older version of the) son around the same age. Cliff holds baby Sam similarly to how the adult Sam keeps Lou close to his body throughout the game, establishing the importance of fatherhood through this parallel but also highlighting the exceptional role Sam plays for the story of saving postapocalyptic America as a person being able not just to be reborn but also to encounter a younger version of himself.

Through this complicated narrative setup, *Death Stranding* features two fathers who mourn the loss of their wives and children and who blame themselves for that, and the game also links them directly as father and son. Sam is thus doubly betrayed by fatherhood, having lacked a proper father himself and being indirectly responsible for his son not being born.[27] Fatherhood thus adds a more sensitive side to Sam's "rough" working-class exterior, aligning with constructions of masculinity along paradigms of the "new man" and the "new father."[28] The game primarily uses Sam's desire for fatherhood and the plot's tragic denial of it to turn him into a figure to more easily sympathize with, feel bad for, and recognize as vulnerable and powerless. Such an

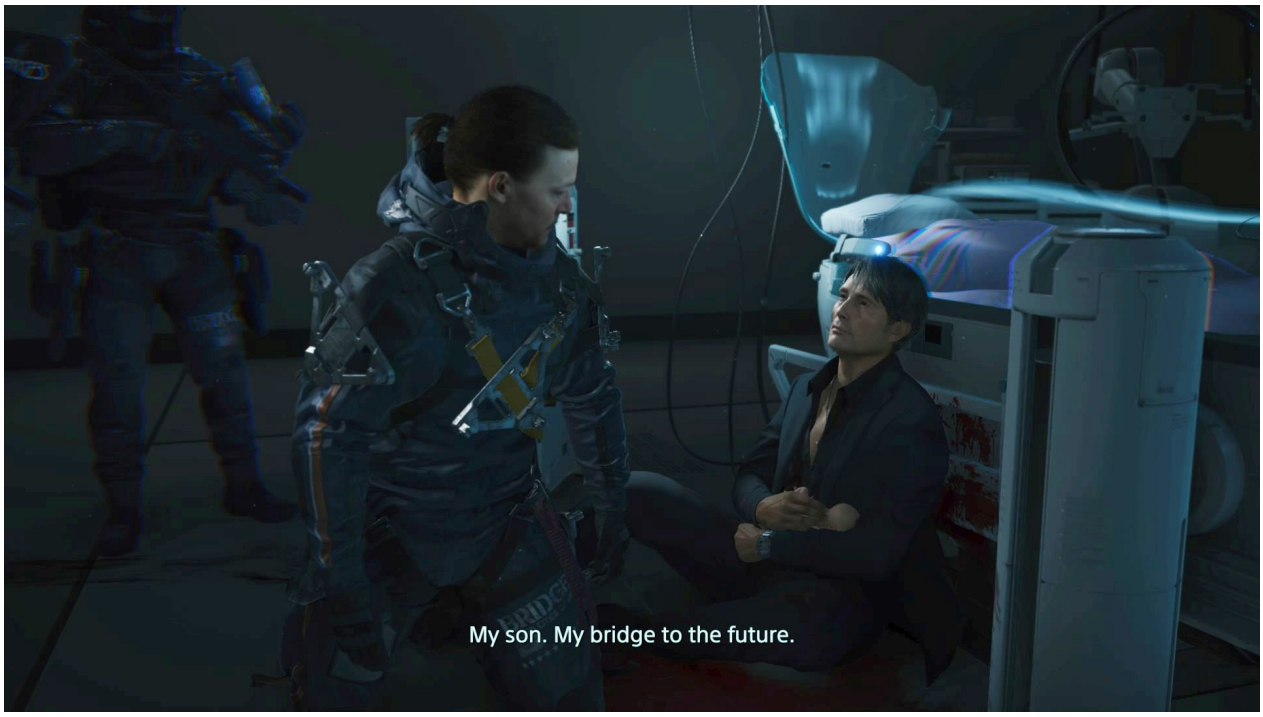

Illustration 3: Cutscene showing Sam, Cliff, and baby Sam.
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

overemphasis on masculine suffering aligns with the notion of "crisis" that Sally Robinson notes is both performative in itself and constitutive of the discourse of masculinity, "as the rhetoric of crisis performs the cultural work of centering attention on dominant masculinity."[29] In the game, fatherhood and being a husband are portrayed as aspects that make Sam vulnerable, and the game wants its players to feel with Sam because it depicts these tragic events as having happened to Sam in a way that made him feel powerless. However, this idea contradicts Sam's depiction in the rest of the game, where he actively, and almost by himself, follows the clichéd plot of saving the world, a display of hegemonic masculinity that is far removed from the notion of a powerless person lacking agency. This, in turn, aligns him with the power white men have traditionally enjoyed in the game's pre-apocalyptic world and seem to continue to hold on to in the postapocalypse. Overall, this setup centralizes the family, and fatherhood in particular, as a source of anxiety for men, and it does so while sidelining or downright excluding mothers from this construction. As Korine Powers has pointed out, the way in which Sam has to carry his BB with him the entire time while being encumbered by the weight of his cargo simulates some aspects of a pregnancy, which adds to how the game casts masculinity as paramount in questions of survival and reproduction. In the game's logic, reuniting and recreating the United States necessitates the discursive power of masculinity.[30]

The game's story of Sam is thus one of guilt and redemption. Similar to how Cliff wanted to achieve some purpose in his life after having lost his wife by endlessly

searching for his son, Sam accepts the task of traveling westward in order to reconnect the UCA as a way to atone for his guilt. In the process, he also forms a new bond with Lou, mirroring Cliff's "final" encounter with his adult son (Illustration 3). While this works out narratively on the individual character level, affectively, by following the game's story from Sam's point of view, players are encouraged to believe in this idea of redemption as well, which depends on Sam's status as sad or "forgotten." With this, however, *Death Stranding* ambiguously connects to the reactionary idea inherent in Donald Trump's evocation of the forgotten man: the suggestion that white men are actually to be pitied for not being in the cultural spotlight of US society anymore. While the game's overall story advocates for a sense of community and bonding, this appears at odds with a belief in having to recuperate the allegedly lost power of white men in America. Politically, this sets up the contradictory affective regime of the game in terms of its affective affordances: players are meant to feel for Sam, to recognize him as "broken" because of his failures as a father, as a husband, even as a son. At the same time, he symbolizes the enduring power of white masculinity in the game's world. Thus, the way in which *Death Stranding* connects its investment in certain affective structures with a narrative backdrop that contextualizes its events in an explicitly political context is also how it evokes what Soraya Murray calls "political affect," a "diffuse structure of what Ann Cvetkovich has described as "relations between the emotional, the cultural and the political."[31] To recognize Sam as a victim, then, seems to build, in Robinson's phrasing, on "a fantasy that … requires the erasure of … white and male privilege."[32] This fantasy is maintained through the trope of the forgotten man and its explicit evocation of "working-class-ness": similar to other forgotten-man stories, the game tries to downplay the power and agency that comes with Sam's status as a white man by also marking him as quasi-working-class.

Working-Class Labor and Ludo-Affective Dissonance

Of course, social classes as known from the actual United States do not necessarily exist in *Death Stranding*'s postapocalyptic world anymore, and there is generally not enough insight into how society is structured to be able to discuss the game's representation of class on a larger scale. Likewise, when following an understanding of class as being about "the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result,"[33] Sam could actually be considered the most powerful character in the game, since he is set up as America's savior, controlled by the player. Yet narratively, he follows the orders of others, especially political actors associated with the UCA. At the same time, through aspects like lifestyle, status, and habitus, and in Sam's actual actions and character design, he is marked as working-class through class markers known from the pre-apocalyptic US,

and this is how questions of class intersect with Sam's whiteness and masculinity.

In addition to the more general markers I already mentioned previously, it is especially the gameplay that aligns Sam with the working class—his main tasks and actions resemble the job of a person who works in parcel delivery (bundled with some elements of a construction worker). The game's many missions usually consist of bringing some kind of cargo from one location to another, for which Sam has to plan his route and equipment carefully. Cargo has specific weight and comes in different sizes, limiting how much can be carried on a particular trip. For maximum efficiency, players can engage in inventory management in order to optimize the best ratio between weight/size of the cargo and potential rewards (and in relation to possible risk). When traversing the environment, players have to be careful not to damage their cargo and to balance Sam's center of gravity through the controls; by using environmental tools like ladders and ropes, they can cross rivers and climb mountains. Routes can be planned in advance, and Sam's health and stamina have to be managed just as much as equipment durability. All of these gameplay mechanics try to simulate various aspects of the job of planning and carrying out parcel deliveries; the focus on "min-maxing" one's rewards according to how much and how fast one can deliver cargo follows a neoliberal logic based on delivery rates that is similar to how many real-life parcel delivery services treat their employees.[34]

Added to this kind of job are tasks of literally building roads, bridges, and other kinds of infrastructure to connect locations with each other. Repairing the roads of America's highway system requires materials that other missions provide as rewards; in turn, the finished roads make it easier to traverse the vast landscapes with vehicles. All of these elements add to how Sam is marked as working-class, but arguably on a more significant level, since rather than "only" being about how the game looks and what kind of story players witness, this concerns how *Death Stranding* works and how exactly players get to interact with the world.[35] Similar to many forgotten-man films, this is also how *Death Stranding* can be understood as setting up its affective regime, in order to avoid the contradiction I highlighted above: the game suggests that it is okay to feel (bad) for Sam, because he is not a powerful white man but a disenfranchised working-class hustler. In turn, *Death Stranding* suggests that what is needed to bring the United States back together is exactly this kind of working-class labor, which the game implies Sam, as a white man, performs best, achieving legendary status as a porter.[36]

The idea of the white working-class man as "forgotten" and as thus lending himself more easily to being felt for and victimized is generally flawed and overly simplistic, but in *Death Stranding*, an additional complication arises due to the game's ludic nature: the working-class labor that players perform in the game is actually fun—or,

at least, it is supposed to be the main source of pleasure in the game. Judging from the split reaction to the game, this might not have worked for everybody, but optimizing how many orders to take, how much cargo players can carry, to which location to go first and then pick up something on the way to neatly line up toward other destinations, or collecting material to build another road, or planning out so-called "zip-lines" for the perfect delivery shortcut, and basically almost all of the many mechanics in the game feed into a particular kind of pleasure tied to planning and organizing efficiently. In a way, it is the pleasure gained from managing loads of data, visualized and made playable in a fantastically postapocalyptic and often stunningly beautiful world. In terms of difficulty, these tasks are not particularly hard to complete, but they are certainly often tedious, with very long distances having to be covered in a repetitive manner. The spectacular backdrop of the postapocalypse against which these tasks take place helps hide this monotony, as does the stream of new regions Sam has to explore and the increasing amount of tools and new gadgets that are provided to him.

These aspects of *Death Stranding*'s design lead to a particular disconnect: since, for the game to be successful as a mainstream title, playing it should be fun, *Death Stranding* is invested in making the tasks players have to perform enjoyable as well, which in turn does not make them seem like hard manual labor but appear as a fun activity with immediate gratification. This is not an instance of "ludonarrative dissonance,"[37] though, since the game's narrative does not comment much on the difficulty of Sam's tasks. Instead, it is a contrast between the game's ludic core and the affective regime I examined before: in order to genuinely feel for Sam as disenfranchised and powerless, the game marks his identity also as working-class, and while this works on a narrative level, it does not succeed on a ludic one. Even though Sam might think of the missions he has to perform as difficult or tedious, this is not the case for how these gameplay aspects have been designed—for players to enjoy. Accordingly, this is instead an instance of "ludo-affective dissonance," a disconnect between how the game wants players to feel about something in the game or how a character might feel about it and how it is actually like to play it.[38] Unlike in a film such as *Manchester by the Sea*, where the audience gets to witness that the protagonist does not enjoy the monotonous custodial work he performs, the kind of work that Sam does cannot feel like a particular hardship to players since the game is invested in making it fun. Consequently, Sam's status as a working-class figure does not manage to intersect with his whiteness and masculinity in a way that would justify feeling pity for him for lacking power or agency—to the contrary. Ultimately, this dissonance is why the game cannot avoid the reactionary political undertones that it evokes by tapping into the forgotten-man discourse.

Finally, *Death Stranding*'s embrace of working-class labor is also connected to a

distinctly neoliberal and capitalist ideology.[39] After all, the better players perform their deliveries, the higher their "score" and the potential rewards they receive. There are multiple systems at work to incentivize players to do well on these tasks, most visible in the results screen that is displayed after every completed mission (Illustration 4). The delivery itself receives a score, in addition to certain bonuses, such as for how heavy or undamaged the cargo was. Using new delivery routes, and being as efficient as possible with respect to the distance traveled, also gains additional rewards, which are tracked as "likes" Sam receives from the person they delivered to. These likes level up Sam's stats, and individual likes from one specific recipient also raise the "connection level" Sam has with them, conferring further rewards. That the rewards are framed as *likes* between the different characters also highlights how they build up an affective community, or rather economy,[40] that maintains this circulation of labor. In addition to a score, the delivery receives an overall rating (which tracks "new records" for that particular mission), and the game attaches achievements to the different kinds of deliveries, adding to a mixture of stats and likes audibly being tallied up after every mission (Illustration 4).

This additional kind of data connects to an overall effort of gamifying the relatively tedious, monotonous, and repetitive tasks Sam has to perform, to make them more fun by being able to track oneself, collect data, look up statistics, try again to improve one's numbers, etc. This way of tracking labor aligns with the neoliberal realities of many contemporary working-class jobs,[41] and it masks the actual monotony and exploitation of much working-class labor. In fact, adhering to these kinds of systems also relates to the game's overall vision of how to reconnect America. While many of its characters and the UCA purport that this is about reestablishing *human* connections, what accomplishes this on the level of gameplay is consumerism: ordering and delivering cargo—connections through goods, through capital. The game follows this capitalist and consumerist idea mostly uncritically. This creates a conflict with elements of the game's story that want to criticize the lack of civility or humanity that characterized the game's United States before the death stranding: after all, the general arc of the story contrasts the "wall" that one of the characters mentions Trump wanted to build with the "bridge" that Sam represents both individually for Cliff and more generally for the communities he has reconnected to the UCA. The game's political project, then, is ultimately fraught with contradictions, and in how *Death Stranding* highlights as essential the working-class labor of its protagonist as a "forgotten man," it embraces and reiterates the trope that it wants to criticize in its mockery of Trump-style politics based on division instead of human connections.

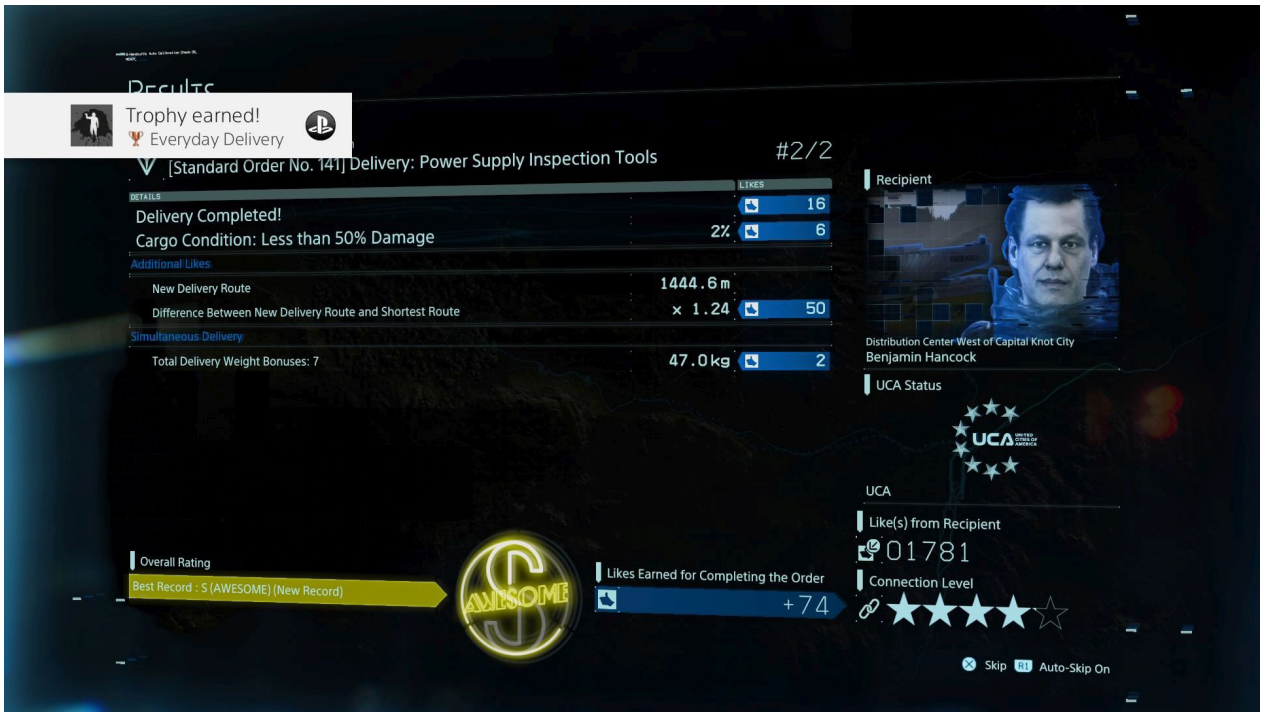

Illustration 4: Results screen after completing a mission.
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

Conclusion

By having examined how *Death Stranding* evokes a particularly American kind of (post)apocalypse and ties it to the western, how its affective regimes build on a forgotten-man story centered around fatherhood, and how its embrace of working-class labor in its gameplay leads to a ludo-affective dissonance, I hope to have shown how *Death Stranding* taps into a similar affective logic as other stories focused on the figure of the forgotten man. The game tries to legitimize a victimization of its protagonist because he is not just a white man but also a working-class one, alongside being portrayed as a failed husband, father, and son. While that is a reductive logic to begin with, the move of this type of story from television and film to game—or from "analog" to digital, interactive, and playable narrative—does not quite pan out because of how *Death Stranding* makes playable, and in turn romanticizes, the monotonous and hard labor of the working class. This is not necessarily a dynamic that the game seems to be aware of, leading to an ambiguous and contradictory political project due to the combination of narrative, ludic, and affective elements at work in the game. As a contemporary cultural artifact that combines older narratives about the US with newly imagined speculative worlds, this reading of the game's politics also reemphasized that this kind of romanticization of white working-class labor is very much at the core of earlier mythical narratives of the US (such as the western) as well, where it usually worked in just as contradictory a manner. The genealogies between such established myths and newer imaginaries certainly merit

further studies, particularly for digital narratives found in video games, and perhaps especially for texts and games that are sometimes deemed "auteur" fiction. Kojima's *Death Stranding* belongs to a category of games that certainly try to experiment with narrative and world-building elements or that could be called "radical" in terms of their gameplay, but their politics often lag behind these innovative ambitions.

Notes

1 All references to *Death Stranding* in this article are to the 2019 PS4 version of the game.

2 Brian Ashcraft, "*Death Stranding* Makes More Sense Now Than Ever," *Kotaku Australia*, March 16, 2020, https://www.kotaku.com.au/2020/03/death-stranding-makes-more-sense-now-than-ever/; Todd Martens, "From My Coronavirus Quarantine, a Love Letter to Video Games," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-26/love-letter-to-video-games-in-a-time-of-coronavirus; Rich Stanton, "*Death Stranding* Hits Even Harder in Lockdown's Aftermath," *PC Gamer*, April 13, 2022, https://www.pcgamer.com/death-stranding-hits-even-harder-in-lockdowns-aftermath/.

3 Jade King, "Two Years Later, *Death Stranding* Is Still A Misunderstood Masterpiece," *TheGamer*, November 8, 2021, https://www.thegamer.com/death-stranding-anniversary-misunderstood-masterpiece/; David Richards, "Hideo Kojima: The Making of a Video Game Auteur," *GamesIndustry.biz*, November 19, 2021, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2021-11-19-hideo-kojima-the-making-of-a-video-game-auteur; Russ Frushtick, "*Death Stranding* Review: Hideo Kojima Tries to Make Fetch Happen," *Polygon*, November 1, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2019/11/1/20942070/death-stranding-review-hideo-kojima-ps4.

4 Robin Meyer-Lorey, "*Death Stranding*: Is It Really a New Genre?" *Game Rant*, November 24, 2019, https://gamerant.com/death-stranding-genre-new/.

5 As mentioned, the game's exact plot is quite convoluted and builds on a few narrative tropes typical of speculative fiction, but in this article, I will only detail those aspects of the story that are relevant for my argument.

6 Óliver Pérez-Latorre, "Post-Apocalyptic Games, Heroism and the Great Recession," *Game Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019), http://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre.

7 John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 46, 57.

8 *Death Stranding*, dev. Kojima Productions (San Mateo: Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019).

9 Lydia R. Cooper, *Masculinities in Literature of the American West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

10 *Death Stranding*.

11 This is similar in a scene between Sam and Amelie, when Sam tells her, "So I'm Mario and you're Princess Peach." While the game points to its awareness of the damsel-in-distress trope in which the video game character Mario has to save the princess, it nevertheless follows a similar pattern.

12 *Death Stranding*.

13 *Death Stranding*.

14 Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

15 "Full Text: 2017 Donald Trump Inauguration Speech Transcript," *Politico*, accessed July 21, 2022, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907.

16 Jon McNaughton, "The Forgotten Man," *McNaughton Fine Art Company*, accessed July 21, 2022, https://jonmcnaughton.com/patriotic/the-forgotten-man/.

17 Jack Halberstam, "White Men Behaving Sadly," in *Unwatchable*, ed. Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 276–79; emphasis added.

18 That is, my interest here lies not in the empirical emotional experience of one particular player but in how the game has been designed in order to afford (or encourage) a particular kind of feeling while playing due to its narrative, audiovisual, ludic, etc. structure, an understanding of affordances that owes to Caroline Levine. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

19 Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 7–8.

20 Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald, "Introduction," in *Literature, Class, and Culture: An Anthology*, ed. Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 8.

21 The (post)western, in turn, lends itself more easily to the forgotten-man trope through its embrace of the cowboy figure; *Hell or High Water* would be one recent example.

22 For instance, when using a certain type of motorcycle, Sam occasionally cries out: "I feel so fucking cool right now. I feel like *Ride with Norman Reedus* is happening right now," referencing an actual travel show on AMC.

23 The character has since received his own spin-off series with *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon* (AMC, 2023–).

24 Sarah Attfield, *Class on Screen: The Global Working Class in Contemporary Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 59–61.

25 The game wants its players to be further emotionally invested in its story by presenting this revelation as a twist, a moment of narrative instability that is built on the ambiguous identities of some of the game's characters and that is enabled by how the storyworld's realms of the living and of the dead intersect, destabilizing time and space. On this notion of narrative instability in contemporary popular culture, see Stefan Schubert, *Narrative Instability: Destabilizing Identities, Realities, and Textualities in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019).

26 *Death Stranding*.

27 Yet it is exactly this kind of fatherly suffering that eventually changes Sam's characterization as a western loner, since the ending seems to suggest that he is embracing his fatherly role again by resorting to take care of Lou—after his own father told him that having a child made him "brave," not "scared," apparently valuing bravery as a stereotypically masculine trait.

28 Elizabeth Podnieks, "Introduction: Pops in Pop Context," in *Pops in Pop Culture: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the New Man*, ed. Elizabeth Podnieks (New York: Palgrave Macmil-

lan, 2016), 15.

29 Robinson, *Marked Men*, 11.

30 Powers thus points out how the game "coopts symbols of female pregnancy to tell stories of male legacy and authorship," imagining "a future where men imbue the world with new life, while women's bodies and pain are beautifully rendered on screen but ultimately stillborn." Korine Powers, "Playing Pregnant in *Death Stranding*," Electronic Literature Organization Conference 2020, July 3, 2020, https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2020/asynchronous/talks/19.

31 Soraya Murray, "America Is Dead. Long Live America! Political Affect in *Days Gone*," *European Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 3 (2021), DOI: 10.4000/ejas.17409.

32 Robinson, *Marked Men*, 8.

33 Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 20.

34 Michael Sainato, "14-Hour Days and No Bathroom Breaks: Amazon's Overworked Delivery Drivers," *The Guardian*, March 11, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/mar/11/amazon-delivery-drivers-bathroom-breaks-unions.

35 It is also a significant contrast to most other action games, since these usually center around more spectacular tasks and actions, such as shooting guns, which only play a minor role in *Death Stranding* compared to the comparatively mundane job of delivering parcels.

36 Although this association of white masculinity with the working class is ubiquitous in US popular (and political) culture, the working class in the US does not actually consist of a majority of white men. Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, 48–49. Generally, though, it is significant that *Death Stranding* embraces the importance of manual human labor in the midst of its science fiction setting that is full of technological innovations, whereas in the contemporary US, efforts are being made to automate parcel delivery or use drones or robots. Such delivery bots exist in *Death Stranding* as well, but significantly, compared to the player, they are quite terrible at the job.

37 Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *Bioshock*: The Problem of What the Game Is About," in *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, ed. Drew Davidson (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2009).

38 For an analysis of how another recent postapocalyptic video game, *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), builds on a specific affective relationship between the player and the game's protagonist(s) and how it (albeit more consciously) makes use of instances of ludo-affective dissonance, see Stefan Schubert, "Playing as/against Violent Women: Imagining Gender in the Postapocalyptic Landscape of *The Last of Us Part II*," *Gender Forum*, no. 80 (2021), http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Issue80_Schubert_ViolentWomenTheLastofUs.pdf.

39 For a more in-depth reading of the game along these lines, see Ryan House's "Likers Get Liked" (2020), in which he frames Sam and the other porters as "precarious laborers in a gig economy." Ryan House, "Likers Get Liked: Platform Capitalism and the Precariat in *Death Stranding*," *gamevironments*, no. 13 (2020), 299, DOI: 10.26092/elib/408.

40 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 46. See also House, "Likers Get Liked," 301.

41 Jay Greene, "Amazon's Employee Surveillance Fuels Unionization Efforts: 'It's Not Prison, It's Work,'" *Washington Post*, December 2, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/02/amazon-workplace-monitoring-unions/.

About the Author

Stefan Schubert teaches at Leipzig University. He is the author of *Narrative Instability: Destabilizing Identities, Realities, and Textualities in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019) and co-editor of the volumes *Beyond Narrative: Exploring Narrative Liminality and Its Cultural Work* (transcript Verlag, 2022), *Realität in Serie: Realitätsbehauptungen in zeitgenössischen Fernsehserien* (Springer, 2022), and *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015) as well as several issues of *aspeers: emerging voices in american studies* and a special issue of the *European Journal of American Studies* on "Video Games and/in American Studies" (vol. 16, no. 3, 2021).

Contact: Stefan Schubert; Leipzig University; Institute for American Studies; stefan.schubert@uni-leipzig.de.